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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 006761

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SUBJECT: MISUARI TO USG "I'M NO TERRORIST"

REF: MANILA 6730

CLASSIFIED BY POLITICAL COUNSELOR STEVEN E. ZATE, REASONS:
1.5 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: NUR MISUARI HAS DECIDED TO REVERT BACK TO HIS ARMED SEPARATIST WAYS, BUT HAS SENT A CLEAR MESSAGE TO THE UNITED STATES CLAIMING THAT HE WILL NEVER BE A TERRORIST AND HAS NOT ALLIED HIS FORCES WITH THOSE OF THE ABU SAYYAF GROUP (ASG). A MISUARI EMISSARY HAS TOLD EMBASSY MANILA HE INTENDS TO BE AN "HONEST ADVERSARY" IN HIS RENEWED FIGHT AGAINST THE PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT (GOP) BUT EVEN NOW IS OPEN TO A REAL AGREEMENT THAT ALLOWS FOR "TRUE AUTONOMY" FOR MUSLIMS. THE MORO NATIONAL LIBERATION FRONT - MISUARI FACTION (MNLF-MF) MESSENGER INDICATED THAT A FULL POLITICAL AND MILITARY ALLIANCE BETWEEN HIS GROUP AND THE ARMED MORO ISLAMIC LIBERATION FRONT (MILF) IS IMMINENT AND THAT JOINT MNLF/MILF OPERATIONS AGAINST GOP FORCES HAVE ALREADY BEGUN IN CENTRAL MINDANAO. THE MESSAGE IS CLEAR - MISUARI HAS AGAIN TAKEN TO THE HILLS BUT HE DOES NOT WANT TO MAKE AN ENEMY OF THE U.S. OR BE BRANDED AS AN INTERNATIONAL TERRORIST. END SUMMARY.

GET THE WORD TO THE US

12. (C) POLOFF MET NOVEMBER 21 WITH REV. ABSALOM CERVEZA, A PROTESTANT CLERGYMAN WHO IS DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES COUNCIL FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT (SPCPD) UNDER THE OFFICE PHILIPPINE PRESIDENT MACAPAGAL-ARROYO. CERVEZA IS A LONG TIME SUPPORTER OF MNLF FOUNDER (AND SUSPENDED MUSLIM REGIONAL GOVERNOR) NUR MISUARI AND WAS APPOINTED BY MISUARI TO HIS CURRENT POST. HE REMAINS MISUARI'S CLOSE CONFIDANT AND ADVISOR. CERVEZA SAID MISUARI HAD ASKED HIM TO PASS SEVERAL MESSAGES TO THE EMBASSY AND THE USG. HE TOLD US THAT MISUARI HAS DECIDED THAT THERE IS NO CURRENT HOPE THAT THE GOP WILL TRULY HONOR ITS COMMITMENTS TO GRANT TRUE AUTONOMY TO THE MUSLIMS - AS CALLED FOR IN THE TRIPOLI AGREEMENT OF 1976 AND THE PEACE AGREEMENT OF 1996 SIGNED BY BOTH PARTIES. SINCE THAT IS THE CASE, MISUARI HAS DECIDED TO GO BACK TO THE HILLS AND LEAD HIS REJUVENATED MNLF FACTION IN THE "ONLY NEGOTIATION THE GOP TRULY UNDERSTANDS - ARMED WARFARE." CERVEZA SAID THAT MISUARI, WHO REMAINS WITH HIS FIGHTERS IN SULU PROVINCE, WANTS THE USG TO CLEARLY UNDERSTAND THAT HE IS "NO TERRORIST," AND "HAS NO LINKS WITH THE TERRORIST ABU SAYYAF." MISUARI'S MAN NOTED THAT HIS LEADER HAS "CONSISTENTLY CONDEMNED THE ASG AND THEIR UN-ISLAMIC BANDITRY AGAINST INNOCENTS."

"IT'S THE GOVERNMENT'S FAULT"

13. (C) CERVEZA SAID THAT MISUARI BELIEVES THAT PRESIDENT GLORIA MACAPAGAL-ARROYO HAS RECEIVED BAD ADVICE FROM SEVERAL MEMBERS OF HER CABINET LED BY HER PEACE ADVISER EDUARDO ERMITA, SPECIAL PROJECTS ADVISER NORBERTO GONZALES, AND DEFENSE SECRETARY ANGELO REYES. THESE THREE HAD CONSPIRED WITH MEMBERS OF MISUARI'S MNLF CENTRAL COMMITTEE LED BY PAROUK HUSSIN TO OUST HIM AND MANIPULATE THE NOVEMBER 26 ELECTIONS IN THE AUTONOMOUS REGION OF MUSLIM MINDANAO (ARMM) TO ENSURE A HUSSIN WIN. ACCORDING TO CERVEZA THIS WAS THE LAST STRAW IN A LONG-RUNNING GOP CAMPAIGN TO DEMOLISH MISUARI'S REPUTATION AND DIGNITY AND TO BRING HIM DOWN IN THE EYES OF HIS SUPPORTERS AND ALL MUSLIMS. "MISUARI IS A PROUD MAN AND WILL NOT STAND FOR THIS DISHONOR, WHILE AT 60 HE IS NOT YOUNG, HE IS OUT TO PROVE THAT HE STILL ENJOYS THE

SUPPORT OF MANY MUSLIMS," CERVEZA SAID. TO PROVE THIS, MISUARI HAS SENT HIS FAMILY OUT OF THE COUNTRY, HAS PICKED UP HIS ASSAULT RIFLE, HAS REFURBISHED HIS MILITARY COMMAND STRUCTURE, AND IS FINALIZING A FORMAL RECOMBINING OF THE MNLF AND THE MILF LED BY HASHIM SALAMAT. (NOTE: SALAMAT BROKE WITH THE MNLF IN THE LATE 1970S AFTER DISAGREEMENTS WITH MISUARI OVER HOW TO PUSH FOR MUSLIM INDEPENDENCE AND A MORE ISLAMIC UNDERPINNING FOR THE SEPARATIST MOVEMENT. END NOTE.) ACCORDING TO CERVEZA THIS AMALGAMATION IS IMMINENT AND MILF AND MNLF-MF FORCES HAVE ALREADY COOPERATED IN JOINT OPERATIONS AGAINST THE ARMED FORCES OF THE PHILIPPINES (AFP) IN SULU AND IN CENTRAL MINDANAO.

14. (C) CERVEZA ASSERTED THAT THE GOP SHOULD HAVE KNOWN THAT MISUARI WOULD JUST GO AWAY, AS THEY EXPECTED HIM TO DO. "THE MAN IS NOT STUPID. HE COULDN'T BE BOUGHT OFF WITH AN AMBASSADORSHIP IN SAUDI ARABIA OR TURKEY," CERVEZA SAID. "NOW THAT MISUARI IS MAKING HIMSELF A MILITARY FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH THE GOVERNMENT IS AT A LOSS TO KNOW WHAT TO DO," HE CLAIMED. "THEY HAVE NO PLAN AND HAVE LEFT MISUARI NO CHOICE BUT TO RETURN TO THE HILLS." CERVEZA ADDED THAT MISUARI BELIEVES THAT HE WILL FORCE THE GOP TO DEAL WITH HIM AND HIS FOLLOWERS POLITICALLY TO ASSURE TRUE AUTONOMY ONLY IF HE NOW PURSUES THE MILITARY OPTION. MISUARI'S MAN INDICATED THAT THE GOP WILL NOW HAVE TO DEAL WITH AN ARMED MNLF AGAIN BECAUSE IT FAILED AT DEALING WITH UNARMED MUSLIMS WHO WANTED A STRAIGHT POLITICAL SHAKE FOR THE "MORO NATION."

COMMENT

15. (C) HUBRIS HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE PRICKLY MISUARI'S BIGGEST FAILING, AND THIS HAS PROMPTED HIM TO TRY AND REVIVE HIS PAST GLORY AS A TOUGH LEADER OF AN ARMED SEPARATIST MOVEMENT. THE GOP, IN TURN, UNDERESTIMATED HIS DETERMINATION TO CONTINUE TO BE A PLAYER. A GENUINE MNLF (SULU-BASED AND MOSTLY ETHNIC TAUSUG) TIE-UP WITH THE MILF (MOSTLY CENTRAL MINDANAO-BASED MAGUINDANAOS AND MARANAOS) IS A DAUNTING PROSPECT AND SHOULD GIVE GOP MILITARY PLANNERS AND POLITICAL POLICY-MAKERS PAUSE. MISUARI IS THE MAJOR POWER BROKER IN THE ISLAND PROVINCE OF SULU AND THE GOP HAS ITS HANDS FULL WITH THE ASG IN BASILAN TO THE NORTH. AN MILF/MNLF ALLIANCE IS NOT A DONE DEAL BECAUSE SOME OF THE FACTORS THAT LED TO THEIR SPLIT REMAIN. IN ADDITION, THE MILF LEADERSHIP REMAINS IN PEACE NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE GOP, AND WHILE THESE TALKS ARE PROCEEDING SLOWLY, THEY ARE MOVING FORWARD. HOWEVER, THE OPENING OF ANOTHER SEPARATIST FRONT THROUGH MILF/MNLF COOPERATION IN CENTRAL MINDANAO WILL NOT BE GOOD FOR THE CREAKY, POORLY LED, AND RESOURCE-POOR AFP. THE AFP STILL HAS TO CONTEND WITH A NAGGING COMMUNIST INSURGENCY IN SCATTERED PARTS OF THE WHOLE COUNTRY AND HAVING TO BATTLE ON TOO MANY FRONTS LEAVE IT STRETCHED EXTREMELY THIN. PRESIDENT MACAPAGAL-ARROYO RETURNS TO THE COUNTRY FROM THE US AND MEXICO ON NOVEMBER 22. THIS ITEM WILL BE AT THE TOP OF HER NOW EVEN MORE PRESSING SECURITY AGENDA. WITH ALL THE RECENT PUBLICITY ABOUT US ASSISTANCE TO DESTROY THE ASG, MISUARI MAY HAVE WANTED TO EXPLAIN HIS MOTIVES IN AN EFFORT TO AVOID HAVING IS RE-ARMED SEPARATIST FORCES BECOME ANOTHER DIRECT (OR INDIRECT) US TARGET. PROBABLY A WISE MOVE.

FITTS